The Genesis Factor

by Stephan A. Hoeller

The following article was published in **Quest,** *September 1997. It is presented here with permission of the author.*

SOME YEARS AGO, Elaine H. Pagels, the noted religious historian, had the importance of the Book of Genesis brought to her attention in a most unusual manner. She was in Khartoum, in the African Sudan, holding a discussion with the then foreign minister of that country, who had written a book on the myths of his people. A prominent member of the Dinka tribe, her host told her how the creation myth of his people relates to the whole social, political, and religious culture in that part of the Sudan.

Shortly after this conversation, Pagels was reading a *Time* magazine in which several letters to the editor took issue with a particular article on changing social mores in America. To her surprise, four of the six letters mentioned the story of Adam and Eve--how God created the first human pair "in the beginning," and what kind of behavior was therefore right or wrong for men and women today. Stimulated by her conversation in Africa, she quickly recognized that many people, even those who do not literally believe it, still return to the archaic story of creation as a frame of reference when faced with challenges to their traditional values.

Pagels realized that, like creation stories of other cultures, the Genesis story addresses profound and basic questions. Americans and Dinka tribesmen are not so different after all; both look to their creation stories when attempting to answer such questions as, what is the purpose of human beings on earth? How do we differ from each other and from animals? Why do we suffer? Why do we die?

Recent events on the intellectual scene have served to affirm these insights. Autumn of 1996 brought a considerable revival of interest in Genesis. Foreshadowed by a series of semi-informal conversations at Manhattan's Jewish Theological Seminary, led by Rabbi Burton Visotzky, the major event of this revival became a much publicized television series entitled "A Living Conversation," devoted entirely to the Book of Genesis.

Hosted by Bill Moyers, himself an ordained Southern Baptist minister who had later shifted his allegiance to the more liberal United Church of Christ, the series raised high expectations in many quarters. A number of recent books have also dealt with the Genesis story.

Robert Alter, one of the most recent translators of Genesis, said: "Moyers has hit upon an idea whose time has come. At this moment of post-cold war confusion about where we're going as a civilization, with all kinds of murky religious ferment, it makes sense to do some stocktaking. Let's go back to the book that started the whole shebang."

Moyers's panelists included Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, a Hindu, a Buddhist, and several agnostics. Not included, however, were persons who could represent Gnostic Christianity, one of the most ancient and at the same time most timely and creative approaches to the interpretation of the Bible. Nor was there any appreciable mention of Gnostic views in the cover story of *Time* magazine (October 28,1996), which followed upon the television series, or in several books published in the ensuing months.

Had the recent revival of interest in Genesis occurred fifty or sixty years ago, this omission might have been understandable. Sources offering alternative interpretations of the Book of Genesis then were few and far between. All this changed, however, after 1945, when a veritable treasure trove of Gnostic scriptures was discovered in the Nag Hammadi valley in upper Egypt. This discovery would transform the character of biblical studies forever. The Nag Hammadi scriptures contain numerous creative variants of biblical teachings.

A Different View of Adam and Eve

William Blake, the Gnostic poet of the early nineteenth century, wrote of the differences between his view and the mainstream view of holy writ: 'Both read the Bible day and night; but you read black where I read white." The same words could have been uttered by Gnostic Christians and their orthodox opponents in the first three or four centuries A.D.

The orthodox view then regarded most of the Bible, particularly Genesis, as history with a moral. Adam and Eve were considered to be historical figures, the literal ancestors of our species. From the story of their transgression, orthodox teachers deduced specific moral consequences, chiefly the "fall" of the human race due to original sin. Another consequence was the lowly and morally ambivalent status of women, who were regarded as Eve's co-conspirators in the fateful deed of disobedience in paradise. Tertullian, a sworn enemy of the Gnostics, wrote to the female members of the Christian community thusly:

> . . . you are the devil's gateway. . . you are she who persuaded him whom the devil did not dare attack. . . . Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on your sex lives on in this age; the guilt, necessarily, lives on too.

The Gnostic Christians who authored the Nag Hammadi scriptures did not read Genesis as history with a moral, but as a myth with a meaning. To them, Adam and Eve were not actual historical figures, but representatives of two intrapsychic principles within every human being. Adam was the dramatic embodiment of psyche, or soul, while Eve stood for the pneuma, or spirit. Soul, to the Gnostics, meant the embodiment of the emotional and thinking functions of the personality, while spirit represented the human capacity for spiritual consciousness. The former was the lesser self (the ego of depth psychology), the latter the transcendental function, or the "higher self," as it is sometimes known. Obviously, Eve, then, is by nature superior to Adam, rather than his inferior as implied by orthodoxy.

Nowhere is Eve's superiority and numinous power more evident than in her role as Adam's awakener. Adam is in a deep sleep, from which Eve's liberating call arouses

Adam's awakener. Adam is in a deep sleep, from which Eve's liberating call arouses him. While the orthodox version has Eve physically emerge from Adam's body, the Gnostic rendering has the spiritual principle known as Eve emerging from the unconscious depths of the somnolent Adam. Before she thus emerges into liberating consciousness, Eve calls forth to the sleeping Adam in the following manner, as stated by the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John*:

> I entered into the midst of the dungeon which is the prison of the body. And I spoke thus: "He who hears, let him arise from the deep sleep." And then he (Adam) wept and shed tears. After he wiped away his bitter tears he spoke, asking: "Who is it that calls my name, and whence has this hope come unto me, while I am in the chains of this prison?" And I spoke thus: "I am the Pronoia of the pure light; I am the thought of the undefiled spirit. . . . Arise and remember . . . and follow your root, which is I . . . and beware of the deep sleep."

In another scripture from the same collection, entitled *On the Origin of the World*, we find further amplification of this theme. Here Eve whose mystical name is Zoe, meaning life, is shown as the daughter and messenger of the Divine Sophia, the feminine hypostasis of the supreme Godhead:

> Sophia sent Zoe, her daughter, who is called "Eve," as an instructor in order that she might raise up Adam, in whom there is no spiritual soul so that those whom he could beget might also become vessels of light. When Eve saw her companion, who was so much like her, in his cast down condition she pitied him, and she exclaimed: "Adam, live! Rise up upon the earth!" Immediately her words produced a result for when Adam rose up, right away he opened his eyes. When he saw her, he said: "You will be called 'mother of the living', because you are the one who gave me life."

In the same scripture, the creator and his companions whisper to each other while Adam sleeps: "Let us teach him in his sleep as though she (Eve) came to be from his rib so that the woman will serve and he will be lord over her." The demeaning tale of Adam's rib is thus revealed as a propagandistic device intended to advance an attitude of male superiority. It goes without saying that such an attitude would have been more difficult among the Gnostics, who held that man was indebted to woman for bringing him to life and to consciousness.

The Western theologian Paul Tillich interpreted this scripture as the Gnostics did, declaring that "the Fall" was a symbol for the human situation, not a story of an event that happened "once upon a time." Tillich said that the Fall represented "a fall from the state of dreaming innocence" in psychological terms, an awakening from potentiality to actuality. Tillich's view was that this "fall" was necessary to the development of humankind.

The Serpent of Wisdom

The sin of Eve, so the orthodox tell us, was that she listened to the serpent, who persuaded her that the fruit of the tree would make her and Adam wise, without any deleterious side-effects. It was Eve who then seduced the righteously reluctant Adam to join her in this act of disobedience, and thus together they brought about the fall of humanity.

A Gnostic treatise, *The Testimony of Truth*, tells a different story. While repeating the words of the orthodox version of Genesis, the Gnostic source states that "the serpent was wiser than all the animals that were in Paradise." After extolling the wisdom of the serpent, the treatise casts serious aspersions on the creator: "What sort is he then, this God?" Then come some of the answers to the rhetorical question. The motive of the creator in punishing Adam was envy, for the creator envied Adam, who by eating the fruit would acquire knowledge (gnosis). Neither did the creator seem quite omniscient when he asked of Adam: "Where are you?" The creator has shown himself repeatedly to

when he asked of Adam: "Where are you?" The creator has shown himself repeatedly to be "an envious slanderer," a jealous God, who inflicts cruel punishments on those who transgress his capricious orders and commandments. The treatise comments: "But these are the things he said (and did) to those who believe in him and serve him." The implication clearly presents itself that with a God like this, one needs no enemies.

Another treatise, *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, informs us that not only was Eve the emissary of the divine Sophia, but the serpent was similarly inspired by the same supernal wisdom. Sophia mystically entered the serpent, who thereby acquired the title of instructor. The instructor then taught Adam and Eve about their source, informing them that they were of high and holy origin and not mere slaves of the creator deity.

What, one may ask, motivated the Gnostic interpreters of Genesis to make these unusual statements? Were they purely motivated by bitter criticism directed against the God of Israel, as the Church Fathers would have us believe? Many contemporary scholars do not think so. These contemporary scholars suggest that the unfavorable image of the creator contrasted with the favorable one of Adam, Eve, and even of the serpent alludes to an important issue not frequently recognized.

The orthodox interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, tend to emphasize the distinction between the infinite creator and his finite creatures. Humans and animals are on earth, while God is in heaven, and never the two will meet. The orthodox have held, with Martin Buber, that the human's relationship to God is always "I and Thou." In the Gnostic position one can discern a keynote that is reminiscent of the attitude of certain other religions, notably Hinduism, which rather declares: "I *am* Thou."

The Gnostics share with the Hindus and with certain Christian mystics the notion that the divine essence is present deep within human nature in addition to being present outside of it. At one time humans were part of the divine, although later, in their manifest condition, they more and more tended to project divinity onto beings external to themselves. Alienation from God brings an increase in the worship of deities wholly external to the human. *The Gospel of Philip*, another scripture from Nag Hammadi, expresses it well:

> In the beginning God created humans. Now, however, humans are creating God. Such is the way of this world-humans invent gods and worship their creations. It would be better for such gods to worship humans.

True God, False God

When discussing the story of Noah and the flood, author Karen Armstrong (A History of God, 1993), as a panelist on Moyers's program, asserted that God is "not some nice, cozy daddy in the sky," but rather a being who decidedly behaves frequently "in an evil way." With his actions in connection with the flood, Armstrong said, God originated the idea of justifiable genocide. Hitler and Stalin, one might deduce, acted on the instruction of such stories as that of the flood and of Sodom and Gomorrah when instituting the holocaust and the camps of the Gulag. Had the panelists called on Gnostic scriptures, they could have quoted many precedents for Armstrong's criticism of the vengeful God of the Old Testament.

The Gnostic *Hypostasis of the Archons*, for example, states that the cause of the flood was not the turning of humans to wickedness, causing God to repent of his creation, as the "official" version of Genesis declared. Quite the contrary, people were becoming wiser and better, so an envious and spiteful creator decided to wipe them out in the flood. Noah was told by the creator to build an ark and place it atop Mount Seir-a name that does not occur in Genesis, but in one of the psalms referring to the flood. Noah's wife, unnamed in Genesis but called Norea by the Gnostics, is a special person, possessing more wisdom than her husband. Norea is the daughter of Eve and a knower of hidden things. She tries to dissuade her husband from collaborating with the schemes of the creator, and ends up burning down the ark which Noah had built.

The creator and his dark angels then surround Norea and intend to punish Norea by raping her. Norea defends herself by refuting various false claims they make. Ultimately she cries out for help to the true God, who sends the golden Angel Eleleth (Sagacity), who not only saves her from the attack of the creator's dark servants, but also teaches her regarding her origins and promises her that her descendants will continue to possess the true gnosis.

There are other scriptures of the Nag Hammadi collection that repeat or refer to the story of Norea, including the *Apocryphon of John* and *The Thought of Norea.* The former does not mention her by name, but states that Noah's descendants were wise ones who were hidden in a luminous cloud, adding significantly, "[This was not] as Moses said, 'They were hidden in the ark.'" In the latter it is not only one angel but "three holy helpers" who intercede on her behalf.

It is quite apparent that the creator god who visits humanity with the disaster of the flood is not identical with the "true God" to whom Norea calls out for help. Viewing the character of the deity of Genesis with a sober, critical eye, the Gnostics concluded that this God was neither good nor wise. He was envious, genocidal, unjust, and, moreover, had created a world full of bizarre and unpleasant things and conditions. In their visionary explorations of secret mysteries, the Gnostics felt that they had discovered that this deity was not the only God, as had been claimed, and that certainly there was a God above him.

This true God above was the real father of humanity, and, moreover, there was a true mother as well, Sophia, the emanation of the true God. Somewhere in the course of the lengthy process of pre-creational manifestation, Sophia mistakenly gave life to a spiritual being, whose wisdom was greatly exceeded by his size and power. This being, whose true names are Yaldabaoth (child of the chaos), Samael (blind god), and also Saclas (foolish one), then proceeded to create a world, and eventually also a human being called Adam. Neither the world nor the man thus created was very serviceable as created, so Sophia and other high spiritual agencies contributed their light and power to them. The creator thus came to deserve the name "demiurge" (half maker), a Greek term employed in a slightly different sense by philosophers, including Plato.

To what extent various Gnostics took these mythologies literally is difficult to discern. What is certain is that behind the myths there are important metaphysical postulates which have not lost their relevance. The personal creator who appears in Genesis does not possess the characteristics of the ultimate, transcendental "ground of being" of which mystics of many religions speak. If the God of Genesis has any reality at all, it must be a severely limited reality, one characterized by at least some measure of foolishness and blindness. While the concept of two Gods is horrifying to the monotheistically conditioned mind, it is not illogical or improbable. Modem theologians, particularly Paul Tillich, have boldly referred to "the God above God." Tillich introduced the term "ground of being" as alternative language to express the divine. The ideas of the old Gnostics seem not so outdated after all.

The Mysteries of Seth

Almost anyone today could declare that Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. The third son is more difficult to name; he is Seth. The third son was provided by God as a replacement for the slain Abel, according to Genesis. He was sired rather late in life by Adam, for Adam is said to have been 130 years old at the time. The historian Josephus wrote that Seth was a very great man and that his descendants were the

discoverers of many mysterious arts, including astrology. The descendants of Seth then inscribed the records of their occult discoveries, according to Josephus, on two pillars, one brick, the other stone, so that they might be preserved in times of future disasters.

In the treatise *The Apocalypse of Adam*, the Gnostics presented us with a scripture that tells not only of Seth (and his father) but of the future of the esoteric tradition of gnosis in ages to come. It begins:

> The disclosure given by Adam to his son Seth in his seven hundredth year. And he said: "Listen to my words, my son Seth. When God created me out of the earth, along with Eve your mother, I went along with her in a glory which she had seen in the aeon from which she came forth. She taught me the word of Gnosis of the eternal God. And we resembled the great eternal angels, for we were higher than the God who created us."

After thus informing us once again of the spiritually superior status of Eve, the scripture goes on to recount how the creator turned against Adam and Eve, robbing them of their glory and their knowledge. Humans now served the creator "in fear and in slavery," so Adam stated. While previously immortal, Adam now knew that his days were numbered. Therefore, he said he now wanted to pass on what he knew to Seth and his descendants.

In the prediction it becomes apparent that "Seth and his seed" would continue to experience gnosis, but that they would be subject to many grave tribulations. The first of these would be the flood, during which angels would rescue the Gnostic race of Seth and hide them in a secret place. Noah, on the other hand, would advise his sons to serve the creator God "in fear and slavery all the days of your life." After the return of the illumined people of Seth's kind, the creator would once again wrathfully turn against them and try to destroy them by raining fire, sulfur, and asphalt down on them-an allusion, perhaps, to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Once again many of the Gnostics would be saved by being taken by great angels to a place above the domain of the evil powers.

Much later there would be a new era with the coming of the man of light ("Phoster"), who would teach gnosis to all. *The Apocalypse of Adam* concludes with this passage:

> This is the hidden knowledge of Adam which he gave to Seth, which is the holy baptism of those who know the imperishable Gnosis through those who are born of the Logos, through the imperishable Illuminator, who himself came from the holy seed (of Seth) Jesseus, Mazareus, Jessedekeus.

These names, which are obviously versions of the name of Jesus (they are found in other scriptures also), identify the culmination of the Gnostic tradition in the figure of Jesus. The "Race of Seth" is thus a biblical metaphor for those following this tradition. In the Gnostic book *Pistis Sophia*, Jesus identifies himself as coming from the "Great Race of Seth".

Old Answers to New Controversies

The current interest in Genesis raises many serious questions. Not a few of these have been illuminated by the neglected light shed by the scriptures quoted earlier. Not unlike the old Gnostics, today's questioning scholars and laypersons are provoked by Genesis to critiques and even to inventions of new variations on the ancient theme. Consider how deeply the social conditions of many countries have been influenced by the picture the orthodox version of Genesis presents concerning Eve and, by implication, women in general. Any of the several scriptures of the Nag Hammadi collection would shed an entirely different and more benign light on these issues.

Secondly, consider the political implications of the story of Genesis. Elaine Pagels, in her fascinating book *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (1988), pointed out that the long-held attitude of the Christian church of submitting to greatly flawed systems of secular

attitude of the Christian church of submitting to greatly flawed systems of secular government was usually justified by the "fallen condition" of humanity as first described in Genesis. Following largely the interpretations of Saint Augustine, most Christians felt that even bad governments were to be preferred to liberty because humans are so corrupted by Adam and Eve's original sin that they are in capable of governing themselves. The libertarian fervor of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that gave rise to the American and French revolutions was clearly not motivated by the spirit of Genesis. The statement that "all men are created equal" does not occur in that scripture, but sprang from the inspiration of the American revolutionaries, who drew from Hermetic, Gnostic, and similar non-mainstream sources.

Thirdly, there remains the terrifying problem of the character of the God of Genesis. Agreeing with Karen Armstrong, we find Jack Miles, in his provocative book *God: A Biography* writing: "Much that the Bible says about him is rarely preached from the pulpit because, examined too closely, it becomes a scandal." Perhaps we may need to take a second look at the Gnostic proposition that the creator mentioned in Genesis is not the true and ultimate God. The unfavorable potential present in the Book of Genesis did not go unnoticed throughout history. Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, a religious teacher prominent in the years after A.D. 70, warned that the Genesis story of creation should not be taught before even as many as two people. Saint Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, wrote that many of the narratives in the Old Testament were "rude and repellent." He certainly included those in Genesis.

The Dinka tribesmen of the Sudan have a point. The creation myth of any culture has a profound effect on the attitudes, social mores, and political systems that prevail. So long as the Book of Genesis remains a basic text for Jews, Christians, and Muslims we can expect the societies within which these religions flourish to be influenced by this book. Still, there is some hope on the horizon. Although the Gnostic alternatives to the content of Genesis are still usually neglected, as indeed they were on television and in the press last year, some prominent figures of our culture are beginning to take notice. To mention but one such figure, Harold Bloom has become one of the most prominent voices calling attention to the creative character of the Gnostic alternative to mainstream religion. His books *American Religion* (1992) and *Omens of Millennium* (1996) have made a powerful case for the timeliness and perennial value of the positions taken by Christian Gnostics, Jewish Kabbalists, and Sufi mystics, all of whom are inspired by a common gnosis. It may be useful to conclude with an incisive and in our view definitive statement from the pen of this scholar:

> If you can accept a God who coexists with death camps, schizophrenia, and AIDS, yet remains all-powerful and somehow benign, then you have faith, and you have accepted the covenant with Yahweh.... If you know yourself as having an affinity with the alien or stranger God, cut off from this world, then you are a Gnostic, and perhaps the best and strongest moments still come to what is best and oldest in you, to a breath or spark that long precedes this Creation.